DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 491 HE 014 985

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TITLE Holistic Education: Beyond the Traditional Basic Skills.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; *Behavior Development; *Cognitive Development; *College Instruction; Educational Objectives; Higher Education; *Holistic Approach; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Learning Modalities; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

Perspectives on holistic education, which encompasses a comprehensive view of the student and concern with the totality of factors that affect the student's education and life, are considered. Based on the view that there is an intimate link between cognitive and affective development, the holistic approach advocates that educational institutions should be intellectually and emotionally nourishing. It is suggested that an integrated, holistic approach to basic skills instruction (i.e., all courses teach reading and thinking and listening) may: provide more opportunities for systematically developing skills, facilitate internalization of these skills within the student's psychological framework, and enable utilization of these skills in a broader range of contexts. Developing intellectual skills through content courses is a defining characteristic of holistic education. Whether through multidisciplinary courses or separate content courses, cognitive skills should be taught across the curriculum. In addition, through a multidisciplinary focus, students may obtain a clearer understanding of the different contributions of the various disciplines as well as obtain a greater appreciation of the complexity of the material they are studying. It is suggested that presenting material across modalities (e.g., visual, auditory) and in a variety of ways within modalities (e.g., visual, pictoral, written) can be beneficial. The educational context includes the immediate environment in which education occurs, the home, the workplace, and the broader community, society and world. The holistic approach should start by preschool and continue throughout graduate school. (SW)

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Holistic Education: Beyond the Traditional Basic Skills

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in press: Montclair Education Review, Spring 1982

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Education is a living system of forces which interact to facilitate human learning and development. In order to maximize the effectiveness of education, one must consider the characteristics of such forces as the people, process, content and context, and determine how their dynamic interrelationships affect the student. Holistic education, which is derived from the progressive tradition associated with Dewey and Piaget, differs from other approaches primarily in its comprehensive view of the student and its concern with the totality of factors which affect the student's education and life.

Lightfoot (1978) argues that social scientists have created a conceptual dichotomy between families and schools, and that these definitional boundaries mask the interrelationships between them. Lightfoot calls for a perspective which views "...the walls of the classroom as windows onto the world".

Similarly, the approach to education proposed here seeks to eliminate conceptual divisions both between education and other dimensions of the world which affect the student, and within the domain of education itself. The present view advocates not only a conceptual synthesis of these dimensions but also a concretely synthesized or integrated approach to the student, skill development, the curriculum and the educational context.

Holistic View of the Student

Unlike the computer, the student is not simply an information processing machine. Affective variables are important determinants of the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills. There is an intimate link between cognitive and affective development. Therefore, from the holistic perspective, educational institutions should be both intellectually and emotionally nourishing. The belief that one can improve one's cognitive skills can facilitate the attainment of that objective. Reciprocally, the feeling that one cannot improve one's cognitive skills can inhibit that form of intellectual achievement.

External validation of one's potential or actual performance can exert a powerful influence on subsequent performance. Consequently, the instructor should make a concerted effort to praise and encourage the student thereby enhancing his or her self concept and achievement motivation. Developmental and remedial students are especially receptive to warm, positive human feedback, perhaps because they have had so little positive feedback in previous academic situations.

Holistic Skill Development

The concept of literacy or basic skill development needs to be expanded. An examination of the processes involved in the "basic skills" reading, writing, and mathematics, demonstrates that each of them is dependent upon the ability to think (Hartman-Haas 1981). Thinking is perhaps the most basic of all intellectual skills. It provides a foundation for the acquisition and development of other basic skills, it underlies learning in all content areas, and is a principal constituent of many every day life experiences. In addition to reading, writing, math and thinking, there are other cognitive competencies which are basic to our lives. Speaking, listening and remembering are other basic skills, which from a holistic perspective, are worthy of development.

The discrete skills approach (i.e. distinct courses for reading, math etc.) is likely to perpetuate the compartmentalization of these intellectual skills, thereby limiting their potential applicability and effectiveness. In contrast, an integrated, holistic approach to basic skills instruction (i.e. all courses teach reading and thinking and listening etc.) may: 1. provide more opportunities for systematically developing skills, 2. facilitate internalization of these skills within the student's psychological framework and 3. enable utilization of these skills in a broader range of contexts.

The concept of literacy should be expanded in another way. What is a

literate person? As culture and technology change, the definition of a literate person must shift correspondingly. Computers currently are moving into the workplace, the home and the schools. A literate person in the new Age of Information will require basic computer skills. At present, computer literacy is considered a luxury. Within a decade it will probably reach the status of a priority. By the end of the century it is almost certain to be a necessity.

Holistic Curriculum

Recent theory and research by Lauren Resnick and her colleagues at the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) in Pittsburgh suggests that learning occurs through making connections between units of knowledge represented in our minds (Schneider 1981). This "glass-box" theory implies that educators might do students a greater service by teaching them to utilize the knowledge they already have than by providing them with new, isolated bits of information. The ability to make inferences is at the heart of this new learning theory. Based on this theory, a multidisciplinary curriculum could provide an excellent vehicle for maximizing students' learning while simultaneously developing their inferencing skills, which Resnick characterizes as one of our greatest intellectual tools. Developing intellectual skills through content courses is a defining characteristic of holistic education. Whether through multidisciplinary courses or separate content courses, cognitive skills should be taught across the curriculum. Learning in each of the disciplines involves many of the same skills. For example, in addition to making inferences, students must select, organize, classify and store information in virtually all parts of the curriculum.

A multidisciplinary orientation is another defining quality of the holistic approach. Through a multidisciplinary focus, students may obtain a clearer understanding of the different contributions of the various disciplines

as well as obtain a greater appreciation of the compexity of the material they are studying. In addition, the multidisciplinary approach can be used to stimulate conflict and structural reorganization, which according to cognitive-developmental theory, can thereby facilitate the transition to a higher level of intellectual development. Rather than teaching multidisciplinary content in all courses, an alternative technique could consist of examining a single important phenomenon from the point of view of a number of different disciplines. For example, the Vietnam War could provide the core curriculum for a course which would cover how economists would think about the war - which questions they would raise, what implications they would consider etc.. Other sections of the course would involve similar issues from the standpoint of political science, history, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Thus with this technique, the "content" is how different disciplines think rather than what they think.

The holistic educational curriculum also can be defined by a variety of techniques through which educational material is presented. Presenting material across modalities (e.g. visual, auditory) and in a variety of ways within modalities (e.g. visual: pictorial, written) can be beneficial for at least two reasons. First, curricular materials can be adapted to the learning styles of individual students. Second, processing information through a variety of formats may have an integrative effect and thereby help consolidate learning.

Holistic Educational Context

From the holistic perspective, the educational context is conceptualized comprehensively to include domains which have an impact on the education of the student, and the domains which will be impacted on by the student. Thus defined, the educational context includes the immediate environment in which education occurs (e.g. classroom/institution: physical features, materials and psychological atmosphere), the home or residence, the workplace, and the broader contexts of

the community, society and world.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of education, both in terms of its impact on the student and the student's impact on the world, educators could design programs which would utilize these contexts. For example, a holistic approach to home/school relations could involve a college program based on parent/child learning contracts. As an economic incentive colleges could offer special family rates. This type of program would be consistent with the current trend of adult learners (returning students) and could perpetuate use of a valuable educational resource - an already existing parent/child educational support system. A variety of educational programs or courses could be created to bridge the relations between students and the other educationally relevant contexts of their lives.

Summary and Conclusions

Holistic education, as described here, is characterized by developing the student both cognitively and affectively; expanding and integrating basic skills instruction; utilizing a multidisciplinary perspective; and incorporating educationally relevant contexts into the curriculum. Rather than having one set of courses to develop affective skills, another set to develop cognitive skills, and a third set to develop knowledge, there should be an integrated curriculum. Fragmented courses and educational strategies probably perpetuate and may accentuate fragmentation within students.

The holistic approach should start by preschool and continue throughout graduate school or other specialized training. Cooperation among and within educational institutions is essential. Just as consistency in parental discipline can abet the development of stable and acceptable patterns of self conduct in children, continuity with this educational approach may facilitate the development of a coherent and elaborate knowledge and skill structure in students.

Education is a complex system. Koestler (1969) suggests that while systems essentially are fixed and invariant, the strategies within them are variable and flexible. Thus while a holistic approach to education rigorously demands attention to the system's components and forces, it provides a framework for tailoring instructional materials etc. to meet the needs of individual students. System components operate interdependently. Therefore, the problem of inadequately prepared students, from preschool through graduate school, cannot be solved through an isolated focus on particular basic skills. The students, educational programs and contexts need to be addressed systematically and comprehensively.

A most problematic aspect of the "back to the basics" movement is that it has the potential to engender institutionally sanctioned mediocrity as the minimum required becomes the maximum attained. Clearly education needs to go beyond the basics. However, there is also a potential problem with the holistic approach. Educators cannot do it alone. The entire society must learn to view and respond to individuals holistically. Only through cooperative efforts across sectors of society can we achieve the development of individuals who can adapt successfully to our complex and rapidly changing world.

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